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Ethnological Parallels to Exodus iv. 24-26

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THIS little paragraph Ex. 4²⁴⁻²⁶ has been a puzzle to the expositors, older and more recent. It narrates that Moses was on his way from Midian back to Egypt; "And it came to pass on the way, at the camping-place, that Yahweh encountered him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched his feet, and said . . . Then he refrained from him." What Zipporah said will occupy our attention later. For the present it is sufficient to note that according to the main stream of the narrative just quoted, the author desires to teach the efficacy of the blood of circumcision as a remedy (or, more exactly, a charm) against disease. When one is suddenly threatened with death, this blood saves his life.

The words used to describe the application of the blood to the patient are **וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו**. The modern commentators see in **לְרַגְלָיו** a euphemism, as though with the amputated **עַרְלָה** Zipporah touched the corresponding part of Moses' person. On the basis of this interpretation they assume that the wrath of Yahweh was aroused by the fact of Moses' uncircumcision, and argue that the circumcision of the son was a substitute for that of the father. But this is to read something into the text. The words "his feet" are perfectly intelligible in their ordinary sense, and the passages cited to sustain the theory that they are euphemistic cannot be called convincing. The verb before us is **וַתִּגַּע**. The pointing shows that it is parallel to **וַיִּגְעַתֶּם** of Ex. 12²². In this latter passage it is used of sprinkling or smearing the blood of the passover lamb on the doorposts of the house. The two narratives seem to be from the same hand, and we

can hardly be wrong in supposing that the author (J in both cases) thought of the two actions as strictly parallel. As in the one case the Sons of Israel were threatened with death and were delivered by the blood of the passover lamb streaked on the door, so in the other case, Moses, when threatened with death, was delivered by the blood of his child rubbed on his feet.

It is evident that we have here a view of circumcision which differs markedly from the one which has passed into tradition. The directions of P in Gen. 17 say nothing of the disposal of the blood shed in the operation. The author there emphasizes the rite as a sign of the covenant, the mark in the flesh which showed membership in the people of Yahweh. In the passage before us this view does not appear, and the blood is the most important thing. It would scarcely be fair to say that the operation is in the writer's mind only a means for procuring the blood, for the blood owes its efficacy to the fact that it is shed in a religious rite. But in the religious rite the disposal of the blood is a matter of prime importance,—so much we are authorized to say. This is a more primitive view than the one held by P, and the passage makes upon us the impression of great antiquity both in this respect and in the matter of the stone knife, which appears only here and in the primitive rite of Josh. 5.

As illustrating the view of circumcision present in the Hebrew writer's mind, I venture to adduce some ethnological parallels which have never, so far as I know, been brought into connection with the Biblical passage. They are from the two works of Spencer and Gillen, entitled *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, 1899, and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, 1904.

It is well known that the tribes whose customs are described in these works all practise circumcision. "After the operation the foreskin is handed to the boy's *okilia* (elder brother or son of his father's elder brother), who also takes charge of the blood from the wound, which has been collected in a shield. He greases the piece of skin and gives it to the younger brother of the boy and tells him to swallow it, the

idea being at the present day that it will strengthen him and make him grow tall and strong. The blood is taken by the *okilia* to his camp, where he hands it over to his *unawa* or wife, and she then rubs the blood over the breasts and foreheads of women who are elder sisters of the boy's mother or of himself. These women must not on any account touch the blood themselves, and, after rubbing it on, the woman adds a coat of red ochre. The mother of the boy is never allowed to see the blood. Amongst some groups of western Arunta the foreskin is presented to the sister of the newly circumcised youth, who smears it with red ochre and wears it suspended from her neck " (*Native Tribes*, p. 250 f.). In another tribe (we are told) the blood and foreskin are taken as before by the *okilia*, and buried in a hole in the ground. Small stones are laid in the hole, after which the sand is filled in and a small stick — perhaps six inches long — is laid over the place. This stick is called *ultha*, and neither the boy who has been operated upon nor any woman may go near it (p. 268). After a young woman has undergone the operation which corresponds to circumcision, the blood is smeared over the bodies of her female relatives, who also drink some of it. When a man is very ill, blood drawn from a woman may be given him as medicine or rubbed over his body, and a woman may be treated in the same way with man's blood. The point of interest is that blood so used is drawn from the organs which have been operated upon by one of the rites of initiation (p. 463 f.).

From the work entitled *Northern Tribes* we have the following: "In the Urabunna tribe the stone knife used in the operation is made ready by the boy's maternal uncle and by his elder brother. After the operation the knife and the foreskin are handed to the elder brother who provided the knife, and he goes around and with the foreskin *touches the stomach* of every man who stands in the same degree of relationship to the boy. This is then buried" (p. 334). "Similarly, in the rite of subincision, which is common to all these tribes, the young man who is operated on touches the head of his father with a little of the blood from himself" (p. 361). In

another case, after subincision, the boy who had been operated upon was lifted up over two men who stood in the relationship of brothers to his destined wife, and the blood from the wound was allowed to drip on their backs. This we are told established a special friendly relation between him and them. At the same time and place some of the blood was as usual "placed in a paper bark dish and, together with the spears and boomerangs, handed over by the father to one of the boy's *tjakaka* (mother's elder brothers), whom he told to go and bury the blood in the bank of a water-hole where the lilies grew. The foreskin, tied up in bark, was at first taken possession of by the *tjakaka* man, who subsequently handed it over to his son, telling him to send it on to a tribal father of the boy living in a distant group. This man finally brought it back to the boy's father with a present of spears, and it was then handed once more to the *tjakaka* man who, after cutting it in pieces, buried the remains in the ground by the side of a water-hole" (p. 372). It may be remarked that the bulbs of the water-lilies are eaten by the natives, and the burial of the foreskin at the place where they grow is supposed to insure an abundant crop.

I may add the following: "The drawing and drinking of blood on certain special occasions is associated with the idea that those who take part in the ceremony are thereby bound together in friendship, and are obliged to assist one another. At the same time it makes treachery impossible. As described in connection with the avenging expedition of the Arunta tribe, the men taking part in this [expedition] assembled together, and, after each one had been touched with the girdle made from the hair of the man whose death they were going out to avenge, they drew blood from their urethras and sprinkled it over each other" (p. 598, with which compare the statement at the bottom of p. 560). In these tribes, as in the cases cited above, special care is taken of the blood drawn by circumcision. The only difference is that, in the tribes now in view, the boy's mother drinks some of it. Here also we read of one locality where it is buried by the side of a water-hole—in this case by the boy's

mother. Here also we find the practice of giving a sick man or woman blood to drink, and of rubbing blood on the body (p. 599 f.).

Among all these cases only one can be called strictly parallel to the one in Exodus. This is the one in which the foreskin was made to touch the stomachs of a definite group of men. But I think it clear that the theory at the basis of the whole group of observances is the same, and that it illustrates the thought of the Biblical author. This theory is that the blood of circumcision is a powerful charm. The amputated skin is also a powerful charm, and, in case the actual rite cannot be performed, blood obtained from the place of circumcision is equally efficacious. All the Australian instances show this to be the view, and it is the only view which will account for the passage before us. If now we seek for a further explanation, in other words if we ask ourselves how this efficacy came to be attributed to the blood of circumcision, we are reminded again of the blood of the passover. That defended the Israelites from death because it was the blood of an animal consecrated to Yahweh as a sacrifice. The dedication of the animal made it partake of divinity to such an extent that the destroying angel or even Yahweh himself could not attack those protected by it.

If the parallel holds, we may justly argue that the blood of circumcision has its magic power because it is the blood of a consecrated person, and that the rite of circumcision is thought of as an act of dedication. But we are not yet at the most primitive conception. The passover victim, when consecrated, is put to death. The tradition which brings the passover feast into connection with the slaying of the first-born intimates, not obscurely, that the original rite was the consecration and consequent sacrifice of the first-born son. The acceptance of an animal as a substitute was a modification of the original rite. May we not argue that circumcision is another modification of the original rite? In the case narrated of Moses, it was actually the first-born son whose blood saved his father from death. If we are to speculate at all on the reason for the anger of Yahweh, the

most plausible hypothesis seems to be that Moses had delayed to sacrifice his son, and that Zipporah saw that the blood of the boy would be accepted, though his life was spared. If that were the lesson of the passage in its original connection, we can account for the fragmentary form in which it has come down to us. The editor would be reluctant to preserve so primitive a trait. Circumcision is in fact supposed by some scholars to be a substitute for human sacrifice.

Confining ourselves to the more obvious teaching of the passage, which we have seen to be the efficacy of circumcision blood, it may be interesting to notice that even in late tradition the blood has not become a matter of indifference. Rosenau, in his recent book on *Jewish Ceremonial Institutions*, says, "If a circumcision has for some cause or other been performed at night, blood, known as the blood of the covenant, must be drawn from the male organ of the child during the following day." And again, "A child born without a foreskin has simply the drop of blood constituting the blood of the covenant taken from him by incision." This requirement of blood to be shed seems to be a survival of the primitive view, though the blood is no longer applied to the persons present.

Up to this point we have had no difficulty with our text. Fragmentary as it is, it is perfectly clear, and the author's main interest is plain. The substitution of "the angel of Yahweh" or simply "an angel" for Yahweh himself in some of the versions is plainly secondary; aside from this there is nothing that calls for remark. It is different when we come to the part of the narrative heretofore ignored, verses ²⁵ ^b and ²⁶. These are usually rendered: "A bridegroom of blood art thou to me. Then He refrained from him. So she said: A bridegroom of blood for circumcisions." To see how inapposite these words are, we must put ourselves in the position of the original writer. The incident which he narrates from tradition was of importance to him not so much because he found it in the life of Moses, as because it had some connection with the customs and usages of his own time. In the real sequence of events the usage was first, the narrative

which justified it was secondary. At the time when the tradition arose it was already an established custom to rub the blood from a young man or from a child just circumcised, or to rub the amputated piece of skin, on the men of the clan. Tradition supposed this to have arisen because at one time Moses was very ill and was saved by the circumcision blood of his first-born son. The sequel of the story should, therefore, be something like this: "Therefore, to the present day, when a child is circumcised, the foreskin is rubbed on the feet of each man of the family." And I believe that something like this was the original ending of the paragraph.

The present ending is unintelligible, first, because it makes Zipporah use twice the phrase **הָתֵן דָּמַיִם**. Conceding that she might have used it once, we are yet wholly at a loss to account for the repetition. To give a reason for present usage (which we have seen to be the author's purpose), the second phrase should be put in the mouth of the people. What we expect, but do not find, is some phrase which the people still use on the occasion of circumcision. But this is only the beginning of our difficulty. The phrase **הָתֵן דָּמַיִם** is likely to mislead us, as it has misled the older expositors, if we translate it 'a bridegroom of blood.' To us the most natural understanding of the words is the one given by Ewald: "She threw the foreskin at the feet of her husband, and reproached him with being a blood-bridegroom, that is, a man whom she received in marriage under the cruel necessity of shedding her child's blood unless she were willing to lose him." But the word **הָתֵן** does not primarily mean a bridegroom. It means a relation by marriage, whether son-in-law, brother-in-law, or cousin-in-law. It is indeed used of a bridegroom in passages which correlate groom and bride, passages where we might also say *son-in-law* and *daughter-in-law*. In the case before us, it would be inappropriate to call Zipporah a bride, and it is equally so to speak of Moses as her bridegroom; for there is no reason why she should think of him as her newly wedded husband. What must have filled her thought (as the incident was conceived by the narrator) was the efficacy of the circumcision blood, and

what she said must have been intended to encourage her husband by reminding him of this efficacy, or else to call the attention of the threatening God to what she was doing. A חתן דמים is one who has been brought into covenant relations with the clan, and, therefore, with the clan-god, a בן ברית in later Jewish usage. It is clear that it would have been perfectly appropriate for Zipporah to say to Moses: "Thou art in covenant with this hostile Yahweh, and therefore canst not die at his hand." It would have been equally appropriate for her to say to Yahweh: "This is a man in covenant relations with thee, and therefore safe from thy wrath." If we allow חתן דמים to stand, we must change the rest of the sentence (אתה לי) and read either לו חתן דמים הוא לך, or חתן דמים אתה לו.

I am aware of the precarious nature of conjectural emendation. It may be well to notice therefore that the earliest interpreters of the passage felt it necessary to get from it some such meaning as I have indicated. The Greek version renders, with no substantial variation in the manuscripts, ἔσθη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου, and this is confirmed by the Old Latin which has: *Stetit sanguis circumcisionis infantis mei*. The verb ἔσθη (*stetit*) is difficult to account for. Whether it has been corrupted from an original ἔσθι, or whether, as the lexicons intimate, ἵσθημι may on occasion be practically equivalent to εἶμι, I will not attempt to decide. But the translators understood the passage to contain Zipporah's warning to the hostile power, as though she had said: "Here is the most potent of all charms to ward off thine attack—the blood of circumcision." Those copies which have vs.²⁶ (it is omitted by homœoteleuton from B) have a similar understanding for that verse, rendering it: "Then he released him because she said: It is the blood of circumcision of the child."

Onkelos shows a similar apprehension of the passage: "By this circumcision blood is the חתנא given to us. . . . Therefore she said: Had it not been for this circumcision blood the חתנא would have been condemned to die (אילולי). (דמא דמהלתא הדין אתהיב חתנא קטול)." The so-called Jeru-

salem Targum, which paraphrases rather than translates, also takes pains to show that the chief point in the narrative is the expiation for guilt wrought by the blood. It is not probable that the Targums had access to any different text from the one now in our hands. They are of importance as showing how the translators were compelled to find in the passage what I have tried to show must have been there originally. Whether the Greek translators had a different text before them is not easy to say, and I am not prepared to restore such a text. The original intent of the passage has been sufficiently indicated.

One question still remains. Is the passage designed to give the origin of circumcision in Israel? This view is now generally held, if we may judge by the most recent commentaries, the best and, so far as I know, the earliest statement of it being that of Wellhausen, which I may quote in full. Speaking of the difference between the method of P, who defines the obligations of Israel in the form of statute-law, and that of J, who deduces these obligations from some event of past times, he says: "Yahweh does not command that the sinew of the thigh shall not be eaten; he wrestles with Israel and dislocates his thigh, and, for this reason, the sinew must not be eaten. How it came about that the young boys are circumcised in Israel is related thus [here follows our text in its accepted meaning]. Zipporah circumcises her son instead of her husband, and so frees the latter from the wrath of Yahweh, under which he has fallen because he is in reality no blood-bridegroom, that is, because he has not been circumcised before his marriage. In other words, the circumcision of young boys is here historically explained as a milder substitute for the circumcision of young men before marriage" (*Prolegomena*³, p. 354 f.).

With reference to the alleged parallel in the sinew that shrank it must be recognized at once that the Biblical author has left no doubt in our minds. He says in so many words, Gen. 32³³, that the custom arose on account of the specific incident which he has narrated. In the case before us there is no such specific declaration. We are left to discover the

lesson of the incident for ourselves. Being thus left, all we discover is what has already been pointed out — the value of circumcision-blood in danger or sickness, and the custom of streaking such blood on the men of the clan. That it is legitimate, when such an exigency as severe sickness arises, to circumcise a child without waiting for any fixed date in its life, would also be a fair deduction from the passage. But that the passage is intended to teach the introduction of the rite into Israel does not seem probable. It may be that the author thought of Moses as uncircumcised, though this seems hardly likely, and it is not a necessary inference from this passage.

To the latest times of Israel's existence it was clear that circumcision was the sign of the covenant between Yahweh and the people. We now see that in the earlier period this thought was expressed in the significant action of streaking the blood of the newly circumcised youth or boy on the men of the clan, or on as many of them as happened to be present. The use of blood in covenant ceremonies is too common to excite remark. But we are tempted to push the inquiry one step farther back; why should circumcision be the mode of obtaining the covenant blood? Some light is thrown upon this custom by the Australian customs which suggested this paper. As we already know from other sources, mutilations of the body are often imitative. For example, among some of the Australian tribes, at initiation, a series of cuts is made on each side of the spine of the novice. These are from four to eight in number on each side of the spine, and are completed by one at the nape of the neck. The scars which are left by these wounds enable a man who has been through the ceremony to be distinguished at a glance. "The cuts, according to tradition, are supposed to represent the marks on the back of the bell-bird, and they are made in commemoration of the time in the Alcheringa (the mythical age of the world before the present system of things came into being) when the bell-bird was instrumental in causing the death of a great hawk-ancestor who used to kill and eat the natives" (*Northern Tribes*, p. 335). Similarly,

the knocking out of the front teeth practised by some of the tribes is known to be imitative. A myth recounts that in the Alcheringa the snakes thus knocked their teeth out. And the point of interest here is that we find a similar myth with reference to circumcision. "Two Parenthie lizards, who were elder and younger brothers, came away from the south into the country of the Utmajera, and finding there some men and women whom an old crow had transformed out of Immintera (that is, imperfectly formed men and women), they operated on the men, both circumcising and subincising them. When all was over they said to the men : Do not say anything to the women about what has been done to you, because it is *churinga* (sacred) and must not be known by women, and they will think you arose just as you are. The men promised to do just as they were told, and, looking at themselves, said that they were *like the Parenthies*" (*Northern Tribes*, p. 495).

In all these cases the rites of mutilation are explained by the desire to imitate the appearance of animals. But this desire is explicable only by the system which we call "totemism." Totemistic societies (all the Australian tribes belong in this category) recognize the kinship of men, animals, and gods. To make the relationship real, the human members of the organization make themselves (especially on solemn occasions) as nearly like their animal brothers in behavior and appearance as they can. Moreover, they cement the relationship by various blood-rites. The rite of circumcision answered a double purpose ; it made the men like some totem animal, and it furnished the blood by which the covenant was sealed. This does not invalidate what was said above about circumcision being a modification of an original human sacrifice, for in totemistic rites the sacrificial victim must be made like the totem animal, and the blood most efficacious for cementing the unity of the clan is the blood of a sacrificial victim. From the particular totem clan which originated it, this rite easily spread to others because of its connection with the sexual life.